

Real X-mas Tree Finds Home on Camp Taji

**By Cpl. Benjamin Cossel
122nd MPAD**

CAMP TAJI, Iraq -- It's an ages old debate this time of year; real or artificial? Christmas tree that is, and for many real-tree enthusiast Soldiers in Iraq, location is causing them to do the unthinkable, get an artificial tree. That is of course unless you happen to be Sgt. Maj. Della St. Louis, operations sergeant major, Headquarters Company, 4th Brigade Combat Team.

"I have never had a fake tree and I have no intention of having one this year," St. Louis said.

Frustrated by her inability to get a real tree on the Iraqi market, St. Louis sent an e-mail distress call.

"I sent an e-mail to a

friend of mine who lives next door to my parents," the Ludington, Mich. native said. "My parents live right next door to a Christmas-tree nursery that my family has been going to for years to get their trees."

It didn't take long once the wheels were set in motion for an arraignment to be made where St. Louis would get her real, Douglas-fir Christmas tree. Needlefast Evergreens agreed to donate two trees as long as St. Louis would cover the shipping costs. Without any hesitation the deal was made and the trees began their long journey from the friendly confines of a Michigan Tree nursery to the foreign Camp Taji, Iraq.

"I only had to cover shipping," St. Louis chuckled. "That's got to be the least expensive Christmas tree I've ever bought."

Once the trees made it to there final destination and were unpacked, the reaction from Soldiers was universally the same.

"Is that a real tree?!"

St. Louis beams proudly "Why indeed it is!"

Wanting to spread a bit of holiday cheer, St. Louis decided to take the tree for a grand tour of Camp Taji, stopping along the way to have Soldiers help her decorate it.

"What good is having a Christmas tree if you can't spread a little bit of the holiday season with it?" she asked.

Packing the tree, ornaments, and candy canes into a humvee, St. Louis took off, playing the role of Santa



Photos by Cpl. Benjamin Cossel, 122nd MPAD

Spec. Brian Sumler (front) and Private Justin Forman, both from Bebe, Ark. with Headquarters Company, 39th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division places candy canes on a real Christmas tree.

in Desert Camouflage Uniform and a Kevlar helmet. First stop on the tour, Checkpoint #1.

Pulling to the side of the road, the initial look of confusion on the Soldiers faces was quickly replaced with smiles and laughter as St. Louis explained why she was out visiting them and what she wanted them to do. A few more decorations added to the tree, the mobile decorating team moved on to the next location.

"This is so cool!" exclaimed Spec. Brian Sumler, Headquarters Company, 39th Brigade Combat Team as he added a candy cane to the tree. "I can't believe someone was able to get a real tree into Iraq."

While the tree brought memories of home and the holidays to some troopers, for others, this will be their

first Christmas with a real tree.

For Pfc. Erika Bruner, 19, Headquarters Company, 4th BCT, it's her first Christmas away from home, and the first time she has ever had a real tree.

"I told sergeant major [St. Louis] I had never had a real tree before and she told me that was crazy," Bruner said. "It definitely has a nicer smell then a fake tree."

One of the fully decorated trees found its home in the office of Master Sgt. Joni Evans, a career counselor for 4th BCT and the other will be on display at the brigade's tactical operations center.

Shaking his head in disbelief, 4th BCT, Administrative Officer, Capt. Tavares Tukes said, "Only some kind of Mack.....or a Sgt. Maj. could get a real tree in Iraq."



Sgt. Maj. Della St. Louis, operations sergeant major, takes her real Christmas tree on a tour of Camp Taji to have Soldiers of the camp help decorate it.

How Can I Sing with Joy in a Foreign Land?

BAGHDAD -- They made me write this article--they ganged up on me. Well, at least they talked me into it--two of them. They actually gave me a deadline. "Chaplain, we need a Christmas article by Tuesday morning. Something about celebrating the holidays while away from home, family, America, deployed to Baghdad, Iraq." The pressure was too much. I caved.

And so it began, with me thinking of my obligation to write, to serve, to be among so many dedicated Soldiers bravely serving nation and cause, collectively kept captive by our mission in this very foreign land. In another time, Mesopotamia would sound challenging--even inviting. This is the place to come as a tourist and connect dots on the map with stories from the Bible and antiquity. Tourists should be lining up at rental car counters and following colored lines on their maps to see sites. How cruel to visit the banks of the Tigris River, to be so close to a Ziggurat fortress dating to 1300 BC from rulers of ancient Babylonia in the Middle Assyrian Empire, and

Chaplain (Lt. Col.)

David Moran

1st Cav. Div. Chaplain

yet so far away. And I'm just scratching the surface--Ur, Babylon, Assyria, Eden, and Nineveh, just to name a few. Yet the end result of the continued insurgency means we stay longer--Global War on Tourism meets Global War on Terrorism--one cruel cycle with one war feeding another--terror banishing tourist, liberator battling terrorist.

I see the potential in Iraq. Others see it too. Occasionally we see a glimpse of the potential here, but more often it is contrast that plumbs the depth of potential not yet fulfilled. A friend just returned from Jordan. He was amazed at the modern amenities. He was amazed to leave a hotel without wearing body armor--even though he looked over his shoulder at the rooftops. He commented on the Christmas lights. He dined with a Christian host who spoke of

even greater celebrations on Christmas Day. Others who have been to Jordan agree that Iraqi tourists there could help many to see the potential of a community working together to overcome oppression, cruelty, and poverty.

I guess Iraqis are held captive too; held captive by fear and expected to sing. Fear of change. Fear of modernization. Fear of a return to totalitarianism. How can any celebrate? How can any sing?

Psalms 137 reports of another time in Babylonia where the Israelites were held captive. "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?" Far from home, family, and land--held captive, the bitterness of captivity far crueler than our limited service.

Yet in the midst of that deeper despair, the tragedy of death and destruction, our

lesser sacrifices, and our family separations, I find hope. On that first Christmas there was singing; singing in the midst of captivity, families traveling to be counted in a census, a pregnant girl ready to deliver with no lodging available and forced to sleep in a stable. Angels sang. They sang to shepherds to point out the critical event that marked a new beginning; a new hope for all men. They sang, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:14). On that day God interrupted the tragedy and darkness of death and introduced change, hope, redemption, and the light of life.

The good news for each of us; for all of us--is that God continues to interrupt and introduce. You are right where God can find you, to interrupt your dark times, and to bring you life, joy, hope, and a song.

Chaplain Moran is the First Cavalry Division Chaplain. He leads singing, praise, and worship every Sunday at the Division Chapel, Camp Al-Tahreer, Baghdad, Iraq.



Useful Iraqi Words/Phrases

Is this seat taken?
hal haazal qiTaar ilaa?

Friday

High: 64
Low: 39



Saturday

High: 61
Low: 45



Sunday

High: 59
Low: 36



Weather information provided by 1CD Staff Weather Office (SWO)

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News Notes

Christmas Makes the Swiss go Mad

KUESSNACHT AM RIGI, Switzerland (AP) -- It's a cold winter's day in the normally staid Swiss Alpine town of Kuessnacht, and bands of wild-eyed young men are roaming the streets brandishing whips. Only on closer inspection is it clear that it's not a riot - just men looking for their next drink. Nevermind Christmas or New Year; this is the eve of St. Nicholas' Day, and an opportunity for the men of Kuessnacht to parade in a spellbinding array of head-gear or go chasing Santa Claus in a cacophonous din of giant cowbells and trumpets. The tradition of Klausjagen, or hunting Santa, illustrates the durability of ancient traditions in European towns and villages.

Holiday Season Can be Stressful

WEST HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) -- It wasn't holiday cheer that poured out of two cars, but rather three holiday shoppers who spilled out with tempers flaring over a parking space. The confrontation developed just after 3:30 p.m. in a crowded lot close to Best Buy, Toys "R" Us and other retailers. When a parking space opened up, two cars turned up to fill it. A woman in one of the cars tossed an orange peel at the other vehicle. Angry words erupted and three people jumped out of the cars and, within moments all three were on the ground fighting.



Daily Messenger

Alicia Stell, left, and her sister Rachael, along with their llama, Pride, helped the Salvation Army bell-ringers on Saturday outside a Wal-Mart store in Newark, N.J. The sisters belong to the Casa De Llama 4-H Club of Ontario County.

Santa Comes to Town Dressed in Blue, Brown

AUSTIN, Texas (*Austin American-Statesman*) -- Santa may have been blue, but the Soriano girls and their mother weren't. For this South Austin family, the Austin Police Department's Blue Santa program meant they could have Christmas.

Just before 9:30 a.m. Saturday, volunteers Raymond Herrington and his wife Zelda pulled up to the family's home on Dan-Jean Drive to deliver a box of toys and a frozen turkey.

"It means a lot," said the four girls' mother, Veronica Ramirez. "I wasn't able to provide (Christmas) for them this year."

Money that might have bought gifts instead went toward car repairs, Ramirez explained.

This is the second year the family has participated in the Blue Santa program. Last year, a sleeping bag was among the items members of the Fire Department delivered.

Delivery day began before the sun shone Saturday at "Blue Santa Headquarters," a warehouse at the old airport on East 51st Street. The warehouse was filled with boxes and volunteers; Austin residents joined members of the Texas National Guard and the city's police, fire, and parks and recreation departments to prepare for their journeys to homes across the city.

Blue Santa, also known as Austin police Sgt. William Beechinor, arrived by helicopter about 8 a.m. to greet the volunteers, who began loading vehicles with boxes of toys and food.

This year's effort was expected to reach



Austin American-Statesman

Residents joined members of the Texas National Guard and the city's police, fire, and parks and recreation departments Saturday at the Blue Santa distribution center in North Austin.

about 3,800 families and more than 12,000 children, according to Operation Blue Santa spokeswoman Deborah Cooper. Recipients include victims of domestic violence, people with terminal illnesses and patients in the pediatric intensive care unit at Children's Hospital.

When Raymond Herrington joined the Fire Department in 1954, the program was not yet called Blue Santa, but the mission was the same.

"We just get a lot of satisfaction out of it," Zelda Herrington said while she and her husband drove their five-delivery route in South Austin.

"The Soldier's Night Before Christmas"

By Major Bruce Lovely

Twas the night before Christmas, he lived all alone,
 In a one bedroom house made of plaster & stone.
 I had come down the chimney with presents to give
 And to see just who in this home did live.
 I looked all about a strange sight I did see,
 No tinsel, no presents, not even a tree.
 No stocking by the fire, just boots filled with sand,
 On the wall hung pictures of far distant lands.
 With medals and badges, awards of all kind
 A sober thought came through my mind.
 For this house was different, so dark and dreary,
 I knew I had found the home of a soldier, once I could see clearly.
 I heard stories about them, I had to see more
 So I walked down the hall and pushed open the door.
 And there he lay sleeping silent alone,
 Curled up on the floor in his one bedroom home.
 His face so gentle, his room in such disorder,
 Not how I pictured a United States soldier.
 Was this the hero of whom I'd just read?
 Curled up in his poncho, a floor for his bed?
 His head was clean shaven, his weathered face tan,
 I soon understood this was more than a man.
 For I realized the families that I saw that night
 Owed their lives to these men who were willing to fight.
 Soon 'round the world, the children would play,
 And grownups would celebrate on a bright Christmas day.
 They all enjoyed freedom each month of the year,
 Because of soldiers like this one lying here.
 I couldn't help wonder how many lay alone
 On a cold Christmas Eve in a land far from home.
 Just the very thought brought a tear to my eye,
 I dropped to my knees and started to cry.
 The soldier awakened and I heard a rough voice,
 "Santa don't cry, this life is my choice;
 I fight for freedom, I don't ask for more,
 my life is my God, my country, my Corps."
 With that he rolled over and drifted off into sleep,
 I couldn't control it, I continued to weep.
 I watched him for hours, so silent and still,
 I noticed he shivered from the cold night's chill.
 So I took off my jacket, the one made of red,
 And I covered this Soldier from his toes to his head.
 And I put on his T-shirt of gray and black,
 With an eagle and an Army patch embroidered on back.
 And although it barely fit me, I began to swell with pride,
 And for a shining moment, I was United States Army deep inside.
 I didn't want to leave him on that cold dark night,
 This guardian of honor so willing to fight.
 Then the soldier rolled over, whispered with a voice so clean and pure,
 "Carry on Santa, it's Christmas Day, all is secure."
 One look at my watch, and I knew he was right,
 Merry Christmas my friend, and to all a good night!

In Brief

Clark In Hospital for the Holidays

BURBANK, Calif. (AP) - TV personality-producer Dick Clark will spend Christmas, and perhaps New Year's Eve, in a hospital where he's recovering from a mild stroke, his spokesman said Tuesday. Clark, who suffered the stroke Dec. 6, is out of the intensive care unit and "doing some rehab," said publicist Paul Shefrin. He will remain hospitalized through Christmas, and will be watching his annual New Year's Eve television special either from his hospital bed or at home in Malibu, Shefrin said. He said doctors hadn't given Clark, 75, a release date yet.

Squirrels Try to Ruin Christmas

CINCINNATI (AP) -- The tree-dwelling rodents, which aren't part of the zoo's official animal population, steal Christmas light bulbs, reports WLWT-TV. Apparently, the squirrels think the bulbs are nuts and unscrew them from the displays for the zoo's famed Festival of Lights. "I don't think they actually bite into it. I think they figure out they can't crack it," said zoo employee Frank Moore. "So, [since] it's not a nut, they just throw it away." The zoo has to replace about 75,000 of the more than 2.5 million bulbs in the Festival of Lights each year.